

SILENCE OF COW: ECHOED IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S TWO VIRGINS

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ABSTRACT

Stray cows, roaming in the roadways, are a common scene in the urban areas. In order to make their living, they learn to digest even plastics and metals. ‘Plastic cow’ is the trendy name given to the pathetic creatures. It is doleful to view the domesticated animals left carelessly on roads, after draining all their goodness. Human treatment of animals exclusively cows are highlighted in Kamala Markandaya’s Two Virgins. Ecocriticism voices out the nature that is silenced by the so-called licensed human. It is not a mere accusation or argument that human is a dreadful enemy to nature, ecocritics try to insist the duty of man towards nature which has been annihilated. Spiritual ecology insists upon the very duty that man has to perform in order to maintain the sustainability of nature. The motto of spiritual ecology is that nature should be considered sacred. Such following is not something new in Indian scenario. For instance, cow is considered sacred and is reverentially called as ‘Gomatha’¹. The paper focuses on the treatment of animals especially cows in the hands of human and to make people conscious of other demonic environmental disasters.

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism, Spiritual Ecology, Anthropocentrism, Cows, Plastic Cows

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is the miniature of the universe. Impact of the society on human and man's impact on society are documented in literature. India has contributed significantly to the overall world literature. A number of Indian novelists have given a concrete form to their creative urge using English language and has brought the Indian English fiction as distinctive force in the world fiction. Literature has become the vehicle of the urges, dreams and sorrows of an average Indian. The works of novelists like R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Gosh are not mere imitations of the western novels but have got a unique style that carries the ethos of India. Kamala Markandaya is one among the Indian writers who touches upon the themes including poverty, hunger, social evils, hybrid culture and inter-racial relations.

ECOCRITICAL VIEW IN TWO VIRGINS

Kamala Markandaya has written her eighth fiction, *Two Virgins* in a feminist perspective as it is evident from the title itself. The fiction is pregnant with multiple themes that need to be given much concentration. One such theme is ecocriticism, “a new variety of critical thinking which opposes the blasé attitude toward the natural world predominant in literary studies” (Phillips 1999: 578). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in literary*

Ecology, by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996) defines, “Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm: xviii)

Gomatha¹ – The Sanskrit word for cow is ‘Go’ and ‘Matha’ is the Sanskrit equivalent word for mother. Gomatha can be explained as ‘Mother Cow’.

Ecocriticism is a must explore theory in the postcolonial concept. Due to urbanization, industrialization and westernization, third world nations like India have lost most of their culture and tradition. Farms have been replaced by industries and apartments in the name of development. The desire and yearn for western clothes and food have numbed the livelihood of many small scale occupations. Activists like Arundhati Roy (2010) raise their voice for the rights on behalf of the voiceless; for instance, in her work *Listening to Grasshoppers* Arundhati Roy says, “Already forests, mountains and water systems are being ravaged by marauding multinational corporations, backed by a state that has lost its moorings and is committing what can only be called ‘ecocide’.”(Roy: xv). The ecology of postcolonial nations is killed in the name of development. A true development should not harm the ecology on the other hand should enrich it. Agrarian nations like India can develop agriculture by avoiding the farm land replaced by industries that make the land sterile, the cattle dumb and the nationalities as future refugees. Kamala Markandaya has brought out the postcolonial effect on the milieu she has chosen to be portrayed in the fiction.

Ecocritical views in *Two Virgins* would make the readers think about ecofeminism, the relationship between nature and women as they are identical in many aspects including their exploitation in the patriarchal society. More than ecofeminism, the paper focuses on ‘Spiritual ecology’ which highlights the idea of voicing out purely for tamed, exploited and dumb animals, especially cows. “Spiritual Ecology may be defined as a vast, complex, diverse, and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interface of religions and spiritualities on the one hand, and environments, ecologies and environmentalisms on the other.” (Sponsel 2013)

More than considering man and nature as equals, spiritual ecology moves a step ahead by giving a remedy to preserve nature in the form of spirituality. Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee is one among the spiritual ecologists who brings out the view that spiritual approach to nature prevents the environment from annihilation. He says “Our forgetfulness of the sacred, our pursuit of solely material well-being, has created an inner wasteland as real as the Tar sands of northern Atlanta.” (Vaughan-lee 2014)

THE PORTRAYAL OF COW IN TWO VIRGINS

Kamala Markandaya’s fiction *Two Virgins* advocates the need for spiritual ecology in present scenario. In the fiction, Manikkam’s wife doesn’t want her cow to get slaughtered, though her husband thought of doing so. The cow is too old to satisfy his economic needs, which leads Manikkam, the owner of the cow, to sell it to the slaughter house. Kamala Markandaya (2010) describes the difficulty of cows in a pathetic way “the old and scraggy though the cow was and only dogs could have chewed through the gristle” (Markandaya: 3). As for Manikkam, the animal has stopped giving milk, and it is useless compared to other cows. The poor cow at least has got a supporter or a caretaker, the wife of Manikkam, who asks her husband “should I grudge her a mouthful of grass?”(p.3). Manikkam leaves the cow on its own accord. For survival, the cow chews some plants from the neighbouring farm owned by Appa, father of Saroja, the protagonist. Prickly pears are planted by Appa to avoid trespassing of the cow, but it doesn’t stop the cow from straying. The prickly pears are harmful to living beings as “Amma sniffed and said it was no good to man or beast” (p.4). The livelihood of cows in urban

areas, nowadays, is more hapless. Stray cows, bulls and buffalos are common scenes in modern, urban sophisticated cities.

PLASTIC COW

In recent days, the stray cows are increasing in numbers. The reason behind the situation is purely anthropocentric attitude of human. The owners prefer to sell the cows as they don't have pasture land to feed the cows in the urban area and many other old cows, oxen calves and oxen have been left on the road as they are considered to be useless. These poor waifs can be seen on the roadside. Some dairy farms show their negligence by allowing the cows to graze on roadside, open garbage only to collect them in the evening for milking. The dailies have published about the menace of the stray animals especially cows and about volunteers who initiate to help the street wandering non humans. An article from Times of India states that,

"KANPUR: Stray animals hinder traffic on all roads in the city and create nuisance at Kanpur Central railway station as well. Cows and bulls freely roam on the platforms and cause obstacles in the movement of passengers. It is a common sight to see stray animals loitering around and even occupying the middle of the road. This disrupts traffic flow and often leads to jams. Many times, bulls lock horns on the roads and pose threat to the lives of the passersby." (TOI 2012, Jan 1)

'Plastic cow' is the trendy name given to the stray cows as they eat plastics to chew the edibles sticking to them. The plastic gets deposited in the rumen of the cows which would result in the death of the poor animals. The impact of change in the lifestyle of humans is comparatively more on nature than on humans themselves. Open garbage system and careless disposal of waste by humans give birth to 'Plastic Cows' in India.

The plastic Cows die due to indigestion, thirst and the unbearable heat as they find no shade to escape from the sun. Most importantly they die of accidents while they roam around the highways. "The holy cow reduced to a dying scavenger"(The plastic cow project, 2014), says an article named *The Plastic Cow Project* (2014), published by an organization called 'Karuna Socitey for Animals and Nature'; many such organizations and social welfare clubs are creating awareness about the value of nature. The word 'holy' is a term interconnected with spirituality. If a man hangs on to spirituality, he does no harm to other beings.

COW AS A SPIRITUAL BEING

As a woman of a poor family, Manikkam's wife feeds the babies of other rich women, without any hesitation or complaint. The ladies of wealthy family consider the primary duties of being a wife are taking care of one's beauty and giving pleasure to their husband. The so called rich women hesitate feeding their babies as they feel that would spoil the beauty of breasts. Manikkam's wife sells her own milk for the 'rich' babies. The situation can be compared with the condition of the cow that is brought up by Manikkam and cows in general. It is a bitter truth that mother's milk is sold and it is evident from the fiction. The cow is milked by the owner for their economic benefit leaving enough to the calf to satisfy its hunger but it is cruel to milk the bovine without leaving anything for the new born calf. "...the milking cow's calf would gambol around with a muzzle on—nothing damped its spirits, not even the muzzle it wore all day long—to stop it drinking the milk Manikkam had to sell."(p.50)

Kamala Markandaya has the talent of projecting multiple themes within a single plot. For instance, "...was a good Hindu, she told him, and never would consent to cow slaughter, but the real thing was she was too fond of the old scraggy

cow... Manikkam's wife stroking the cow, and bathing its udders which were cracked and yellow and rubbing coconut fat into the splits." (p.3)

Here Kamala Markandaya insists 'Hindu' not in the intention of imposing Hinduism to the readers, rather to show how in the name of Hinduism, the cow is taken care reverently. The simple following of a religion protects a poor non-human from being slaughtered. Spirituality and religion have nothing to do together but most of the humans find spirituality through religion. India is known for its spirituality as it is a place of sages, who are known for their spiritual wisdom. Swami Vivekananda and Gautama Buddha are Indians who have got their spiritual wisdom purely through experiencing nature. Religion acts as a medium to spirituality, and spirituality acts as a medium to preserve nature.

MaatuPongal² is a religious festival of Hindus, celebrated in Tamilnadu. It is a festival which celebrates the holiness of the cow and is a kind of thanksgiving to the cows. In India, cow is reverently called as Gomatha and Kamadenu³. The animal is considered as a Goddess that showers blessings to the human beings. It is a verity that a cow gives many useful products. "Panchagavya, the five products of the cow (i.e., milk, curd, clarified butter, urine and dung), is viewed by Hindus as the purest substance available for ritual use" (Korom 2000: 193-194). Giving abundantly until the receiver's heart gets fulfilled is called blessing, and this is best suited in the case of a cow, and it is the reason for Hindus to worship and celebrate the cow reverently.

Govindasamy Agoramoorthy and Minna J. Hsu (2012) in their paper *The significance of cows in Indian society between sacredness and economy*, have registered the words of Mahatma Gandhi about the sacredness of cow "if someone asks me what the most important outward manifestation of Hinduism was, I would suggest that it was the idea of cow protection" (Agoramoorthy and Hsu 2012: 5) Cow is known for its calm behavior, and it can be easily tamed. It is one of the reasons for this animal to find a place in religion. Cow has been believed as goddesses in olden period, and humans have cared the animals reverently in the name of spirituality. Later, the populace started treating cow as a friend of human beings. In the recent centuries, cow is considered as mere slaves and a source of income to fulfill the needs of people. The selfish and remorseless nature of human is portrayed in the fiction *Two Virgins*. If the calf of Manikkam's cow is dead, the corpse is stuffed with straws to deceive the poor cow to get milk for selling. "Manikkam would stuff the skin and carry it about on his shoulders and during his rounds and the cow's milk would continue to flow... Saroja felt it was wrong, felt the calf had an entitlement to its mother's milk" (p.50).

Maatu pongal²— A festival celebrated in Tamil Nadu, a southern part of India. Cows are decorated and given sweet rice along with fodders as it is considered as a God. Cow is considered as a boon for the agricultural nations like India. Every state in India celebrates a festival exclusively for cows and one such festival is 'Maatu pongal'.

Kamadenu³— A Hindu mythical goddess who grants the wishes asked for. It is often considered as the mother of all other cattle.

The narcissistic nature of humans reaches to such an extent where the government stores have begun selling adulterated oil cakes for their own financial benefits, obviously, the ultimate sufferer is the cow. Even then Manikkam's worries only about the milk, "the milk went sour on no time. Manikkam blamed the oilcake that the government store distributed when grazing was sparse."(p.70). Aunt Alamelu and Saroja are the good souls who consider cow as a spiritual being, 'holy mother cow'. It is evident that cow is a goddess, and it is also registered in the history of India, "the cow was considered as a mother goddess in the Mediterranean civilizations. The cow became celebrated in India, first during the

Vedic period (1500-900) BCE as a symbol of wealth. Bulls were sacrificed to the gods, and people ate their meat. Nonetheless, the slaughter of milk-producing cows was prohibited.”(Agoramoorthy and Minna 2012: 7)

With or without any intention, people follow some rituals, which mostly preserve and protect nature. For instance, worshipping animals and trees is practiced in Hinduism, even killing a poisonous snake is considered a sin, and this spares the life of at least a few snakes. Now-a-days people follow the sacraments blindly without knowing the inner lying meaning which leads to more destruction. For instance, cow dung is used to sprinkle around many Indian houses as it is considered as sacred but the real intention is that the dung got some antibacterial value. In recent days the cow dung has been replaced by chemical mixed powder that is toxic, which doesn't have any good values. Hindus worship Cows, even they touch the tail of the creatures reverently but they leave it to roam around the roadside with thirst and hunger. A practice of bringing a cow inside a newly built house is followed by Hindus. They do so, as it is a belief that cow brings wealth and health to the home. The irony is if a cow trespasses in a house, the tenant drives it away without even giving water to quench its thirst.

NEED FOR SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY

Man in the name of development and modernism, moves away from spirituality which is a treasure of knowledge, peace and wisdom. Spirituality does not accuse modernisation but charges the way modernisation takes. Destruction rather than construction is the result of modernisation. In the name of religion, ancestors have reverently protected flora and fauna. W.B.Yeats, in *Second Coming*, has correctly pointed out, “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...the ceremony of innocence is drowned”. Spirituality is the strongest centre to be held in order to preserve Earth from apocalypse. Llewellyn Vaughan-lee (2013), lectures,

“we developed a materialistic culture that uses the earth for its own selfish purpose. Rather than fulfilling our traditional role as guardians of the planet, the earth became a means to serve our ever-increasing material desires. Our greed now walks with heavy boots across the world, with complete disregard for the sacred nature of creation, until we find ourselves living in a dying world. And yet because for centuries we have been taught that we are separate from the world, that it is just an object we should try to control, we have forgotten that it even has a soul. We are cut off from the world and its interconnectedness. Our Western culture no longer knows how to relate to it as a sacred being.” (Vaughan-lee 2013)

CONCLUSIONS

It is time to educate people to hold on to the spiritual views on nature, and it is essential to encourage the mass to practice rituals that are related to nature by knowing the true intention of the practices. Nature is a beauty to admire not a slave to be mastered; it is a sacred entity to be worshipped and a child to be taken care of. Sacredness of the cow protects it from being slaughtered but, remorseless human let it wander in roads as a ‘dying scavenger’. If nature is considered sacred, not only the stray cows but also all the earthly beings can be saved.

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